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REVIEWS

MR. ROBINSON IN CAMELOT

Merlin, by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Macmillan Co.

Que diable faites-vous dans cette galère? one might ask Mr. Robinson when one finds him trying to resuscitate Merlin and Vivian and King Arthur, and others of that overworked and much over-poetized Camelot crowd. To tell the truth, they do not show very disquieting signs of life at the touch of his blank-verse wand, although they indulge freely in long discursive monologues and dialogues. He puts Merlin and Vivian through new paces, quite domesticates them at Broceliande—

“Now be a pleasant Merlin,” Vivian said—
and gives us a glimpse of the “poor, foiled, flouted, miserable king,” with his “old illusions that were dead forever”; but there is little magic in his touch upon any of these familiar figures.

It is too late in the day to touch them without magic, even though the poet's purpose be not mainly with their familiar drama but with his philosophy of life. He uses Merlin to show us once more the wise man, the king-maker, wearying of wisdom and power and utterly content with love until, finding that “his cold angel's name was Change,” he is forced back upon philosophy. And he uses this episode, and the whole Camelot tragedy, to show the tragedy of human destiny, which mixes up wise man, fool and king until one can not tell them apart, and confounds their plots and

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counterplots, their crusades and wars—all the elaborate machinery of their presumptuous ruling of men's lives. And, of course, through all this, the poet has modern affairs in mind, as well as those of the little mythical group so dear to song and story.

It is Robinson experimenting à la Tennyson, and the fusion is not complete. There are passages of "orgulous" blank verse—if we may borrow Merlin's word in praise of Vivian—many long and wisely reflective speeches; but they are neither in our temper and dialect nor in those of the time-honored heroes of the *Morte d'Arthur*. Such a speech as this of the shorn sage to his charmer, for example, is neither fish, flesh nor fowl:

My dear fair lady—
And there is not another under heaven
So fair as you are as I see you now—
I cannot look at you too much and eat;
And I must eat, or be untimely ashes,
Whereon the light of your celestial gaze
Would fall, I fear me, for no longer time
Than on the solemn dust of Jeremiah—
Whose beard you likened once, in heathen jest,
To mine that now is no man's.

And Vivian, who is represented as pleased, for a brief period, with this solemnly pompous love-making—Vivian, who, as the slip-cover kindly informs us, "for the first time in modern literature comes to her own"—what does Mr. Robinson make of the witch-lady of old romance?

Alas, we become too familiar with her, with the usual consequence. She dissipates her witchery in speeches of forty or more smooth pentameter lines, uttered while Merlin is

Mr. Robinson in Camelot

in "the noose of her soft arms"—like this:

Look at me now and say if what I say
Be folly or not; for my unquiet head
Is no conceit of mine. I had it first
When I was born; and I shall have it with me
Till my unquiet soul is on its way
To be, I hope, where souls are quieter.

This from the author of such a masterpiece as *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford!*

It is queer what a fascination those old tales have for the most indigenous poets! One would have pronounced Mr. Robinson immune—now that he has had a light case of the fever perhaps he will be. H. M.

A MISGUIDED POET

Sappho in Levkas and Other Poems, by William Alexander Percy. Yale Univ. Press.

This book has been so much praised by highly respected reviewers that I have taken it up a number of times with a firm resolve to read it. But each time I have failed. Only the heroic purpose of writing about it enables me to read it, because it is full of everything that I most dislike and resent in poetry: from words and phrases imitative of a bygone diction or manner, like *guerdon*, *methinks*, *of yore*, *the em-purpled air*, *the limpid surge of darkness*, *the gray and lucent hour*, *the gods' ambrosial dalliance*, and hundreds more such minor derelictions, to the mortal sin of sacrilegious misuse of a great name and an ancient tradition.

It is strange that the lyric Sappho, whose fame rests upon some thirty magic lines, should have inspired more long-